This paper examines the direct and indirect roles of tea culture in the work of the painter Qian Du (1764-1844). It begins by describing the literal presence of tea objects and the direct inscription of tea words in Qian Du's paintings, but it goes on to suggest that the most interesting aspect of the relationship between the practices of painting and tea is how they resonated at the level of connoisseurship and discourse. Words such as clarity 清 and quietude 靜, or lightness 澹 and removal 幽, permeated the language of painting as they did the language of tea appreciation. By isolating moments in the early nineteenth century practices of tea and painting where these concepts were invoked I will explore how the literati ideals that transcended media could connect different material practices and amplify their meanings.

In many of Qian Du’s landscapes scholars are accompanied at their book-laden desks by delicate teacups. In the background of his crisply detailed mountain retreats servant boys can often be found fanning the open mouths of braziers to bring tea water to a boil. In Qian’s inscriptions and poetry he describes the smells, colors and sounds of tea. His name can even be found inscribed into several Yixing
teapots made by his long time friend Chen Hongshou (1768-1822). This involvement with tea seems common for Qian’s place and time. As the son of a well-to-do family from Hangzhou, Qian was surrounded by tea consumption and production.

It is the commonness of Qian Du’s relationship to tea, not its exceptionalism, which makes it worth mentioning. The appreciation of tea and painting were practiced by elite families throughout imperial China alongside the equally important cultured habits of enjoying calligraphy, reading and writing poetry, savoring liquor and plum blossoms, and reading or commenting on history and literature. Modern scholarship on Chinese painting has accounted for the intersection of painting with poetry, calligraphy, liquor, history, and plum blossoms, but only rarely has the study of tea been taken seriously in relationship to painting.

The prevalence of paintings related to the enjoyment of tea throughout the history of Chinese painting also brings up some of the more problematic issues within the overall scope of my dissertation project: why study this phenomenon in the early nineteenth century? Why not study it in its earlier manifestations in the Song court or among Wu School painters?

A preliminary and problematic answer to those questions is that I chose an early nineteenth century painting topic for my dissertation subject in order to experiment with how the history of Chinese literati painting can be written. A more traditional analysis of the relationship between tea and painting would begin with its origins. Likewise, a more common way to write about Qian Du’s painting would be to focus on his affiliation to painters of the past. But the major reason that early nineteenth century painters are nearly ignored in art historical literature is that nothing appears to originate in their work and to most art historians their painting seems slavishly bound to repeat past literati painting tropes. In order to take early nineteenth century literati painting on its own merits it seems necessary for us as art historians to momentarily alleviate painters like Qian Du of their debt to paintings of the past and to notice how their work gained some of its strength by being aligned with other literati material cultures through the overarching concepts that unified literati culture. Tea seems a good place to start.

With the feedback from the China Project Workshop, I hope to complete a dissertation chapter on the subject of tea in Qian Du’s paintings and his life in general. As a whole, the dissertation uses the paintings of Qian Du in order to understand the stylistic and social priorities of this period in art, which is largely under-researched due to biases that are both historiographic and structural in the field of Chinese painting studies. Other chapters deal with the relationship between epigraphy and painting, the use of political networks, and the nature of literati biography.